

# QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ACCREDITING FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXAMINATIONS IN HUNGARY

**Jenő BÁRDOS**

Eszterházy College, Eger

**Abstract:** Accreditation has a relatively short past in the 40-year-old history of public FL examinations in Hungary. The state used to operate a system called State Language Examinations and paid a salary bonus to civil/public servants for successful language examinations for several decades. This monopoly was challenged both politically and professionally in the mid-90s. In a short reform-period, the old model was transformed into a market-oriented system of state-accredited language examination centres, both Hungarian and foreign. The accreditation process was carried out in harmony with some state decrees and ministerial orders, and followed the requirements of the Accreditation Manual first published in 1999 (Lengyel, 1999). The process of transformation and benchmarking to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels (Council of Europe, 2001) was checked by the Hungarian Accreditation Board for Foreign Language Examinations, which is an independent body of experts established by the Ministry of Education. The latest challenge for the exam-providers is to continuously develop and relate their accredited examination systems to the CEFR levels by means of a quality assurance (QA) system, in addition to their convictions and inspiration. Unwilling exam-providers may lose their state accreditation, while willing partners will have to follow the processes by relating foreign language examinations to the CEFR described in the Manual (North et al., 2003). The rigour of the process will depend on the number of examinees: exam providers with over one thousand candidates per year are required to apply at least three of the five classic ways of linking separate assessments: equating, calibrating, statistical moderation, benchmarking and social moderation.

## Introduction

For more than twenty years after World War Two, there were no public language examinations in Hungary. There was a centrally controlled matriculation exam all along, but students sitting for examinations in the so-called ‘western’ foreign languages (such as German, English, French or Italian) were scarce, as Russian became the compulsory foreign language in 1949. There were, however, some mandatory language examinations in higher education, which were offered by the foreign language departments of various colleges and universities. We also had the so-called ‘candidate of science’ language examinations (in which the ‘candidate of science’ is identical with a PhD: the title was borrowed at the time from the Soviet Academy of Science). The National Committee for International Scholarships also organised specialized exams for those scholars who applied and became eligible for international scholarships and research grants. The situation did not change until the end of the 60s, when a new economic system was introduced and Hungary opened up to international tourism and commerce, which increased the demand for experts and specialists with a reliable command of foreign languages. There was an urgent need to launch public

foreign language (FL) examinations both in general and profession specific language proficiency for internationally prestigious languages in addition to – or instead of – Russian.

In the fifties, there was a College for Foreign Languages bearing the name of Maxim Gorky which was closed down in 1957. Few people are aware in Hungary that the 1956 Revolution played an indirect role in the establishment of the Foreign Language Development Centre (FLDC, known to Hungarians by the abbreviation ITK, or simply as 'Rigó utca', from the location of the main building). Most of the teachers who used to work at the Gorky College established a Foreign Language Institute loosely connected to the best known university of Hungary, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. This unit became the nucleus of the FLDC, which was established in 1967 to launch public FL examinations in several languages. It was a breakthrough to open public language examinations in the 60s, because the numbers indirectly showed what the real demand for languages was under the Kádár-regime; a demand to which the educational authorities of the time seem to have been utterly indifferent.

The FLDC was responsible for the development of the varieties of language examination systems in all requested languages, known as the 'State Language Examination System' for exactly three decades. Examination reforms were introduced in the end of each decade: in 1969, 1979, 1989 and 1999. It is easy to see that the history of public foreign language examinations had only two major periods in Hungary: the time of the so-called State Language Examination System (1969-99) – during which the state was willing to pay extra money to public servants holding state language examination certificates –, and that of our times, which is the era of a highly commercial, but state-accredited language examination market. This study offers a chronological overview and analysis of foreign language examinations in Hungary (cf. Bárdos, 1986).

## 1 The past: State Language Examinations

There were three major varieties of the State Language Examinations, which, for the sake of simplicity, can be labelled 'archaic', 'classical' and 'modern'.

Between 1969 and 1979: the 'archaic' or 'old-fashioned' state language examination consisted of two substantial translations, one from and the other into the foreign language, and an insignificant oral exam. Those who failed the written test were not allowed to sit for the oral. The oral examination consisted of the oral translation of sets of grammatically difficult sample sentences, and out-of-context vocabulary checks, such as enumerating lexical fields or memorized idiomatic expressions. At the time in Hungary, the audio-lingual and the audio-visual methods were the dominant language teaching approaches, which means that the examination was already old-fashioned and out-of-date in its own time; hence the label: 'archaic'.

Between 1979 and 1989: there was a so-called 'classical period', which was heralded by the reform implemented in 1979. It was a significant break-away from the written examinations and a clear turn towards oral skills. Out of the seven marks given at the intermediate level examination, five were given for the oral performance. Listening comprehension was part of the oral exam in form of a separate task: two to three minutes of recorded conversations or stories were supposed to be recapped or summarized by the

candidates in the foreign language or in Hungarian, depending on the level of the exam. Language Examinations contained bilingual tasks too, as mediation skills were considered to be useful for the whole society. At the very beginning, there were only two levels of State Language Examinations: intermediate and advanced; the elementary level was introduced much later in the 70s. This was the time when the number of state language examinations reached 30,000 per year, because of the appearance of secondary school students who were exempted from the matriculation exams in foreign languages if they could produce an intermediate or higher level certificate of the State Language Examination. In the 80s, the Hungarian State Language Examination was a modern and adequate language examination. But what about its quality in the technical sense of the word?

At that time quality assurance (QA) was virtually unknown to Hungary. It took another 5-10 years for the 'quality virus' to infect the fields of testing and education in general. There was no external quality assurance in education, but attempts were made to create systems that could be called 'internal quality assurance'. At the FLDC ('Rigó utca'), the writing and selection of testing materials was carried out by teams, irrespective of whether they were multiple-choice tests, listening texts for the oral, or texts selected for translations. Native speakers operated as members of these teams (in English, for instance, Helen Thomas, Caroline Bodóczy and Peter Doherty), and the vice president of the Language Examination Board had the task to select the best material for the three examination sessions per year. In the end of the process, some sensitive materials were pre-tested in small groups, but the policy was to eliminate or delete anything that did not seem to be a hundred percent reliable. All examination materials were discussed once more after the examination and most of them were published, but there was no item analysis, reliability was not checked, and there were no statistical analyses. In other words, testing materials used for the Hungarian State Language Examinations in the first two decades were not standardized in the technical sense of the word. Their reliability was based upon the experience of dedicated language teachers, who were undoubtedly amongst the best in the country. Still, quality control only existed in the form of peer review or some other forms of social moderation, at best. The faith that these professionals placed in their own intuitions now seems to be somewhat naïve.

For the sake of simplicity, we may call the phase between 1989 and 1999 the modern period of the State Language Examination. As a result of the 1989 reform, the examination system became modular: 'Module A' stood for the oral component, 'Module B' stood for the written part and 'Module C' for the complex (oral + written) language examinations. Modules 'A' and 'B' could be combined in one examination session, or they could be taken separately in any order). 'A' and 'B' could be united later into a 'C' by a formal request.

Under the influence of the communicative approach, or at least communication-centeredness, the variety or range of tasks was significantly extended by role-plays, picture descriptions or summarising instead of oral translation. The number of examinations was approaching one hundred thousand per year in fifty two languages with the help of approximately four hundred examiners, only forty of whom were employed by the Foreign Language Development Centre. In the meantime, the system of internal quality assurance did not change significantly: it was the vice presidents of the Language Examination Board who were responsible for the quality of the examinations. They were requested to observe at least one third of the oral examinations and check more than forty percent of the written examinations. Training courses for examiners developed as the Centre's activities were no

longer restricted to the capital: six provincial centres were established in the most important university towns. By the mid-1990s there was more research done into the quality assurance questions affecting these language examinations, with the help of more professional methods. At the request of the Ministry, the State Language Examination system was screened by two international bodies: the Goethe Institute (represented by Paul Rainer and Alfred Walter) and the Cambridge Examination Syndicate (represented by Joanna Crighton and Richard West). Their evaluations of the situation were mostly accurate, but among their recommendations and requests some could not have been achieved or fulfilled even by their own respective home institutions.

Despite a significant improvement in quality and standardization, more and more attacks were launched against the monopoly of the State Language Examination system, especially from the direction of private firms, as a result of market-oriented thinking in all walks of life in Hungary. Following the political changes of the year 1989 – the same year when Russian ceased to be a compulsory foreign language in Hungary – there came a four-to five-year period of transition in which various committees of experts tried to create a framework, a system of rules for a new language examination market. The road to this present plethora of language examination systems was flanked by state decrees, orders of governmental regulations, a 122-page Handbook of Accreditation (Lengyel, 1999), plus the setting up of the Hungarian Accreditation Board for Foreign Language Examinations (HABFLE) in 1998. And there came the process of accreditation itself, which reflected the vim and vigour of the interested parties: stakeholders, experts and other professionals alike. As an observer of the events, serving as member and eventually president of various committees, I was able to attest that the efforts of the previous three decades had been justified: several teams of professionals had proper experiential knowledge in most fields of language assessment. Those 30 years were over – but not in vain.

## 2 Between past and present: the process of accreditation

As a result of a significant amount of work done by various, rather provisional committees of experts, a framework was prepared in roughly two years to switch from a centrally-planned, single examination system to a multi-linear, multi-channel, multi-faceted, market-oriented diversity, which was, and still is, regulated by ministerial decrees. By 1999 a detailed handbook for the accreditation of foreign language examination systems and centres was written by the members of the HABFLE (Lengyel, 1999). The changes to be made were more than innovations: they were rather similar to a conversion. It is no exaggeration to use this word, because ten years after the political changes certain fields of the economy remained unchanged, while this segment was to turn into a two-thousand-million-forint market. 1999 was to be the final year for the old-type state language examinations, and from 2000 the whole country switched into the world of state-accredited foreign language examinations, and the number of accredited examination systems and centres increased year by year. The old examination centre, (or ‘Rigó utca’), was amongst the ‘early birds that caught the worm’: under the cleverly chosen name of ‘Origó’, they were accredited straight away. ‘Origó’ not only contained their nickname, but also suggested that they had been the origins of FL assessment in Hungary.

By the year 2004, we had 24 language examination systems and centres operating in the country (Fazekas, 2004) which were administering their examinations at more than 400 locations. Nowadays candidates do not have to travel far: one can sit for the most important language examinations in nearly all major towns of the country. (Needless to say, despite all supervision and care, this is a real nightmare come true for any language assessment expert!) Some internationally famous British and German exam providers have also had to undergo the process of accreditation in order to stay and maintain their position on the flourishing Hungarian FL examination market.

## 2.1 Some principles and objectives of the accreditation process

According to the relevant decrees and orders, the purposes of the accreditation process are: to extend the number of institutions entitled to issue state-accredited language examination certificates; to achieve the comparability of the various examination systems; to ensure that accreditation centres and locations would operate reliably; to ensure European standards; and to satisfy an intense social need for public foreign language examinations. At the same time, certain features of the previous system have been preserved. For example, the age limit for examinees remained unchanged, i.e., the exams are open to people over 14. Another important rule is that it is compulsory for all language examination centres (foreign or Hungarian) that at least two examiners should evaluate any part of the oral and written examinations. State regulation of examination fees can also be considered to be a conservative feature of a centrally-planned economy, but the fees for examinations offered by a foreign examination body constitute an exception. When the accredited language examination centre is part of a university, examination fees can be reduced or cancelled for the students of the university in question. Fees will also be paid for the accreditation process in order to support the development of FLE systems for minority, rare, or less frequently taught languages.

## 2.2 Responsible bodies

The body responsible for providing and sharing information and getting all the administrative work done is the Education Authority's Accreditation Centre (OH NYAK in Hungarian) for FLEs, while the board of experts which makes decisions on programmes and institutions is called the Hungarian Accreditation Board (HAB) for FLEs (OH NYAT in Hungarian). The decisions of the HABFLE have to be made public, but examination providers have the right to appeal in cases where any infringement of the law (such as partiality or prejudice) can be proven. The HABFLE consists of 9 experts who hold degrees (and/or PhDs) in modern philology and/or language pedagogy and assessment, and have at least 10 years of experience in developing and administering FLEs. Positions on the HABFLE are filled through competition judged by way of applications. To put it very simply, the AC (Accreditation Centre) is the office, and the AB (Accreditation Board) is the selected body of experts.

### 3 The characteristic features of the accredited FLEs in Hungary

Language Examination Centres (exam providers) are required to submit the specifications of their examinations (e.g., the combination of parts and/or modules of the oral and/or written); the socio-linguistic purpose of the examination (e.g., general proficiency or specific-purpose examination); the number of languages in the scope of one examination and the skills tested (monolingual/bilingual; and comprehension-communication-mediation); the levels (elementary, intermediate, advanced); and the type of the target language (modern living languages, classical languages, artificial languages, Hungarian as a FL, etc.).

#### 3.1 General proficiency, or foreign languages for specific purposes?

General proficiency examinations are not supposed to use specialized language in tasks, texts, performances or in any other activities, while specific purpose examinations are supposed to focus on the jargon of various professions such as business, medicine, catering, or technical and natural sciences. There is a constant increase in the demand for FLEs for specific purposes, because most universities or colleges require one or two intermediate level C-type (oral and written) FLEs for specific purposes as a condition for granting a degree. This requirement is rather more didactic, than social, as a large number of graduates are unable to fulfil the expectation of having appropriate competencies in two foreign languages. Every year many students cannot obtain their tertiary degrees for lack of the prescribed level of (general or specific) FL certificates.

#### 3.2 Monolingual and bilingual examinations

Skills in individuals are built in hierarchies: there is no communication without comprehension and there is no mediation between languages without communication in two languages. Comprehension and bilingual communication develop disproportionately. The comprehension profile is much 'broader' than communication (take, for example, passive and active vocabularies in native speakers). In practice, there is no real monolingual examination in foreign languages. In case of monolingual L2 examinations, where only the target language is used, L1 is veiled in mist, it is obscure; it is present, but not transparent. The competences tested by monolingual FL examinations are valuable only in the target language country or abroad. At home, in the L1 country, mediation skills are more often needed than direct communication. This is the argument for bilingual FLEs, and that is what makes them more valuable and weighty. The surplus of bilingual foreign language examinations represents the recognition of mediation skills (translation and interpretation) as a set of skills equal to, or even more important than the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Nevertheless, the skills required at a bilingual language exam are hierarchical, which means they are logically embedded into each other, that is: mediation skills also consist of comprehension and communication, but in two languages.

### 3.3 Levels and skills

State accredited foreign language examinations in Hungary are supposed to check upon each of the four basic skills in their examination systems on one or several of the traditional three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced. These categories are fairly vague and elusive at the same time. They have been formed by public opinion, beliefs and misbeliefs, and not by scientific measurement. As a result of the international influence of the Common European Framework of Reference (2001, CUP) and its levels from A1 to C2, references will have to be made to levels B1, B2 and C1 under the same ‘pseudonyms’ (beginner, intermediate, advanced) – as state-accredited FL exams in Hungary (B1, B2 and C1) have kept the old, rather clumsy expressions. In comparison with the old system, requirements have moved up slightly on the two lower levels (B1 and B2), while the advanced level (C1) might narrow down a little. This relationship of changing levels is illustrated by Figure 1.

PUBLIC AWARENESS (OR BELIEFS) ON EXAM LEVELS FOR 40 YEARS	NEW EXAM LEVELS FROM 2006	CEFR LEVELS
ADVANCED LEVEL		C2 P R O F I C I E N T U S E R
	‘ADVANCED’	C1 I N D E P E N D E N T U S E R
INTERMEDIATE LEVEL	‘INTERMEDIATE’	B2 B A S I C U S E R
	‘BEGINNER’	B1 A 1
ELEMENTARY LEVEL		A2 A1

Figure 1. Relating accredited FLEs in Hungary to CEFR Levels



### 3.4 Frequency of languages in FLEs

There are only two languages in Hungary for which there is a mass demand in FLEs: English and German, and by now we have twice as many examinations in English as in German. Other modern living languages can be classified as minority languages, or languages less frequently or rarely taught, of which, in spite of the low numbers, French, Italian, Russian and Spanish seem to stand out. Among the minority languages, one of the Roma languages, Lovari, is coming up. In addition to modern languages, there are examinations in classical languages such as Latin, or artificial languages including Esperanto. Examinations in Hungarian as a foreign language are also offered. Figure 2. presents the distribution of languages at FLEs between 2005 and 2014<sup>1</sup>. The total number of FLEs in Hungary has decreased recently due to the increase in the number of standardized FLEs available in public education.

Number of FLE Certificates in Hungary between 2005-2014 (Matriculation and Higher Education Exams are NOT included)											
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Ancient Greek	1	11	2	7	1	3	3	0	0	0	28
Arabic	13	17	28	20	14	22	23	12	16	10	175
Chinese	1	10	8	21	23	19	16	12	13	3	126
Croatian	290	292	300	270	274	176	169	137	119	80	2,107
Czech	25	12	11	16	13	17	9	16	13	6	138
Danish	0	3	6	9	15	17	13	12	12	8	95
Dutch	22	44	43	42	46	45	39	39	30	31	381
English	106,638	111,239	108,661	112,824	114,739	115,269	111,768	97,590	88,521	63,686	1030935
Esperanto	2,985	3,991	6,163	5,596	5,586	5,422	5,240	3,699	3,613	2,699	44,994
Finnish	47	35	40	45	57	66	51	36	31	20	428
French	3,113	3,499	4,664	3,744	3,917	3,557	3,438	2,838	2,237	1,921	32,928
German	51,184	53,994	46,544	44,409	42,355	40,432	38,104	32,324	28,530	20,060	397,936
Greek	21	35	23	27	17	24	20	10	17	18	212
Hebrew	49	38	38	35	40	37	23	17	16	14	307
Hungarian	315	207	259	227	255	263	283	233	222	168	2,432
Italian	2,168	2,170	2,641	2,141	2,136	2,121	1,877	1,488	1,287	1,151	19,180
Japanese	23	16	13	37	29	41	45	36	45	27	312
Latin	590	426	583	394	333	335	232	196	119	78	3,286
Portuguese	44	38	57	41	53	6	5	14	4	5	267
Roma (Beash)	46	76	58	45	110	81	53	28	23	16	536

<sup>1</sup> Data taken from the homepage of the Education Authority's Accreditation Centre (NYAK, OH): [http://www.nyak.hu/doc/statisztika.asp?strId=\\_43\\_](http://www.nyak.hu/doc/statisztika.asp?strId=_43_)



<b>Roma (Lovari)</b>	1,096	1,270	1,692	1,938	2,382	2,176	1,779	1,284	945	739	15,301
<b>Rumanian</b>	212	231	350	174	186	190	180	168	95	68	1,854
<b>Russian</b>	890	805	1,002	800	740	757	619	565	466	416	7,060
<b>Serbian</b>	131	135	133	90	92	87	70	92	46	62	938
<b>Slovakian</b>	254	384	330	269	192	295	346	239	160	99	2,568
<b>Slovenian</b>	10	4	33	5	10	3	1	5	4	3	78
<b>Spanish</b>	1,481	1,537	1,837	1,491	1,518	1,818	1,583	1,324	1,166	1,057	14,812
<b>Swedish</b>	0	26	58	46	52	59	40	41	42	18	382
<b>Turkish</b>	21	19	30	22	28	0	38	33	32	16	239
<b>Ukrainian</b>	105	93	139	94	56	2	0	0	1	1	491
<b>Total</b>	171,775	180,657	175,746	174,879	175,269	173,340	166,067	142,488	127,825	92,480	1,580,526

Figure 2. The distribution of languages at free-market foreign language examinations in Hungary between 2005-2014 – considering successful examinations

### 3.5 Institutional and/or programme review?

Language assessment is a very complex field of educational measurement. It is an inter- or multidisciplinary domain of language pedagogy, where such distant fields as linguistics and mathematical statistics, examination techniques and acoustics, cultural anthropology and ethics are closely and inextricably intertwined with various fields of applied linguistics. Familiarity with the phenomena of the world of FLEs requires a very broad, multifaceted expertise. The complexity of the field should also be reflected by the processes applied in QA, too, when the target is language assessment. Here we have to face several controversies between institutional audit and programme assessment.

Even a superficial check on the QA activities of language examination centres (LECs) will justify the following categorization: their accomplishments are either software-oriented or hardware-oriented operations. In Figure 3, mainly objects (instruments, devices, various types of equipment, etc.) can be found on the 'hardware'-side; while various products, processes, activities, etc. appear on the 'software'-side. Hardware-oriented matters serve as conditions for institutional accreditation, while the quality of software-oriented matters influences programme accreditation. It is obvious that both sides are needed and it is no surprise that these double foci were observed throughout the process of accreditation in the forms of institutional and programme reviews. Details of the two processes are regulated by the ministerial order (30/1999 [VII.21.]) and described in a thorough (and sometimes epic) way by separate chapters in the original Accreditation Handbook (Lengyel, 1999). In our picturesque, but short description here we could not follow the abundant enumerations of the Accreditation Handbook; we had to select the most typical features to characterize the profiles of these twin processes in the Hungarian FLE accreditation process.

<p><b>‘Software’</b>  Software Programmes and Packages;  Item-banks, Task-banks;  Test Analyses, Validity and Reliability;  Impact and Backwash;  Test Development and Validation;  Scoring, Marking, Encoding, Encrypting;  Quality Assurance (QA); etc.</p>
<p><b>‘Hardware’</b>  Information Technology: PCs, Printers, Scanners, etc.  Optical Reading Systems, etc.  Printing Equipment;  Information-Systems: Fax, Phone, E-Mail, PCs;  Security Equipment (e.g., Storage Facilities);  Office Equipment and Environment;  Language Laboratories, AV-Devices;  Noise Reduction Systems;  Illuminating Engineering (Lighting Effects); etc.</p>

Figure 3. ‘Software’ and ‘Hardware’ aspects and conditions of FLE processes

The crucial point in the programme accreditation is the inspection of sample tests, because experts (members of the HABFLE) will have to verify that test descriptions and samples comply, and levels of the given examination observe the description of levels in the CEFR. For this reason, two series of sample tests have to be submitted to HABFLE of each skill at each level – three times a year. Statistical criteria for pre-testing, test-item analysis, test development and validation in general are prescribed in the Manual (cf. Banerjee et al., 2004; and North et al., 2003;).

#### 4 The present: realignment of FLEs to CEFR levels

What the new millennium brought forth was the dissemination of new ideas on how to learn, teach and evaluate foreign languages in an activity- and communication-centred process, which were obviously not new at the time. The new objectives and principles in evaluation were best communicated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). (I hasten to declare that – in the words of the philosopher Pangloss from Voltaire’s *Candide* – the CEFR is still the best of all possible worlds). As an increasing number of countries had accepted these ideas and built them into their systems of curricular objectives, teaching materials, and language examinations, the CEFR gradually became a standard, or more poetically a ‘pharos’ to show the right direction through the sea of unexciting classroom techniques. The volume itself is difficult to read, partly because the text cannot be read as a linear construct – as there are 86 figures, scales, charts and checklists, tables and grids included – that would confirm the status of CEFR as a reference book. What we expect of the title is a detailed system of ‘can-do’ statements, a nomenclature of standards,

and they are all there: a taxonomic descriptive scheme and the reference levels. On the other hand, there are some chapters in the volume on curricula, classroom solutions, and feedback which are typical features of textbooks written on the theory of instruction. Obviously, the authors could not resist the temptation to write some chapters on language teaching methodology as well. Their attempt to unite these two components was quite unusual, and resulted in a genetically-manipulated creature: the volume is neither a methodology textbook, nor a reference book of figures and tables. Still, the language teaching profession reacted well to CEFR (cf. Morrow, 2004): most of the ideas were soaked up and absorbed by practising teachers as well as by policy-makers in most countries. In fact, in some cases CEFR was elevated to the status of a new testament for modern language teaching and serves as a soothing balm for all maladies. And that is obviously different from its original objective, which was to serve as a guideline. In addition to the problem of genre, the CEFR has been criticized for many things in the specialized literature for instance for the separation of interaction and the productive skills of speaking, writing, interpreting and translation in general. The CEFR was translated and published in Hungarian only in 2002 (Közös Európai Referenciakeret, Oktatási Minisztérium). By 2005 the Manual on Relating Language Examinations to CEFR levels had also been translated into Hungarian (Bárdos, 2006) and became available electronically from the website of the Educational Authority's Accreditation Centre for FLEs (NYAK in Hungarian). In the meantime various projects were launched to boost foreign language teaching and learning in Hungary and the development of the new types of matriculation exams in foreign languages also focused on CEFR levels, not to mention the spread and popularity of the European Language Portfolio. As a result of decisions made at ministerial level, the government decided to take measures in order to make state accredited language examination centres relate their examination systems to CEFR levels. The process of realignment started in 2006, with only three levels selected for the accreditation process (B1, B2 and C1).

#### 4.1 The conditions of realignment

The objectives were the same as before: to maintain a market-oriented but state-regulated system of accredited FLEs. To achieve that purpose the most important legal documents had to be changed slightly, especially the governmental decree of 71/1998 (IV.8.) and the ministerial order of 30/1999 (VII.21.). Similarly, changes had to be made in the relevant parts of the Accreditation Handbook as well (cf. Bárdos, 2007). The most important of all these changes was the modification of the description of the levels in comparison with the old one. Most of the renewed documents came into force in 2007 to provide a solid legal background. Examination centres received financial support to develop their new systems, improve their infrastructure, IT facilities, etc. through requests to the Accreditation Centre for FLEs. Members of the HABFLE were supposed to give lectures and offer consultations to language examination centres both individually and in groups. The Manual on Relating Language Examinations to CEFR Levels (Bárdos, 2006; North et al., 2003) became available in paperback form, and the more technical Reference Supplement (Banerjee et al., 2004; Horváth, 2007) had been translated into Hungarian. Language examination centres had to follow the processes of familiarization, specification, standardization and empirical

validation as they were described and explained in the Manual, and the number of examinees in a language per year was decisive in selecting the relevant processes with regard to the rigour of the critical external validation processes. According to the decisions made by the HABFLE, categories were set up according to the number of examinees per year, per language and per level. If the number of examinees was between 1 and 100, then the minimum expectation was social moderation. If the number of examinees was between 101 and 1000, then in addition to social moderation, statistical moderation was also a condition (as described in Chapter 2.3.1 of the Manual (Bárdos, 2006; North et al., 2003). If the number of examinees was over 1000, then the accredited centres had to select at least three of the five standard processes described in the Manual: social moderation, bench-marking, statistical moderation, calibrating or equating, in order of increasing rigour.

## 4.2 Pitfalls and disadvantages

To have a common framework of reference levels is only a starting point for the re-alignment process. The efficiency of this linking experience may depend upon such ordinary or prosaic factors as the lack of time and money, since changes in educational systems are no longer financed by the state. But the lack of time is even more pressing. Language examination centres were caught in this process somewhat unguarded and unprepared, and, at the same time, regarded as institutions full of unflagging energy. What challenge could overcome the restrictions of time and money? Some people would say professional ambition and knowledge, but there were only a handful of places in Hungary, at universities and examination centres, where testing and evaluation of foreign languages were considered to be essential parts of the curriculum, or common practice. There was a lack of sample material that could have been used in the linking or realignment processes, and there was also a lack of certainty about the safety of the whole examination market.

Half of all examinees were secondary school students. As soon as the new matriculation exams had been accredited, students were encouraged to sit for those examinations free of charge within the scope of public education. Furthermore, Hungary has had a falling population for years now. In most developed countries there is a major research institute responsible for developing testing and evaluation with special respect to language assessment (cf. the ETS in Princeton, N.J.). Considering the number of people involved in FL teaching, learning and testing in Hungary, knowledge on FL assessment is sparse, limited to a very few postgraduate programmes, FL examination centres, doctoral schools in applied linguistics, or the educational measurement programmes of a small number of colleges and universities. In a country of examination fetishism more attention should be paid to the question of how to obtain expert knowledge in language assessment. Fortunately, a promising new generation of experts has recently made headway in the advancement of the theory and practice of FL assessment and evaluation in Hungary (Csépes, 2009; Dávid, 2011; Hock, 2003; Szabó, 2008, and others). No wonder that we are the only country in the world where all possible FLEs are accredited to the CEFR...

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